

# The Canada Goose: *Branta canadensis*

## Atlantic Flyway Resident Population

### Background

Resident populations of Canada geese were extirpated from the Atlantic Flyway following European arrival in North America. The present-day resident population, comprised of various subspecies, was introduced and established during the early 20th century by birds released by private individuals. When the use of live decoys for hunting was prohibited in 1935, captive flocks of domesticated or semi-domesticated geese were released. From the 1950s to the 1980s, wildlife agencies in Many Atlantic Flyway States were actively involved in relocation and stocking programs to establish resident populations, primarily in rural areas. These programs were highly successful and most were discontinued by 1990.

Most of the 11 subspecies of Canada geese are encountered in the lower 48 States only during the fall, winter, and spring, and migrate to the arctic and sub-arctic regions of Canada and Alaska to nest in the summer. Some, however, stay in the U.S. year-round. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) identifies "resident Canada geese" as those that nest within the lower 48 States in the months of April, May, June, July, and August.

### Population Resurgence

Today the Service estimates that the population of the resident Canada goose in North America is at 3.6 million. Presently, resident Canada goose populations in the Atlantic Flyway exceed 1 million birds, and has increased an average of 14% per year over the past 10 years. Among several factors that have influenced this large population increase are low abundance of natural predators, healthy breeding habitat conditions, tolerance of human and other disturbances, long life span, and absence of waterfowl hunting in urban areas. In combination with each other, many of these factors have contributed to high production and survival rates of offspring.

An abundance of suitable habitat in urban and suburban areas pose as a large factor in the population increase of Canada geese. With the inability to hunt these populations, the geese are well protected and have adapted to the high food availability and suitable breeding habitats of current landscaping techniques.

### Issues

With many suitable habitat areas such as local parks, golf courses, pastures, landscaped areas and lawns, Canada geese are thriving in urban and suburban areas. Large numbers of Canada geese damage crops, landscaped and other grassy areas. Their presence at airports are a serious safety threat causing fatal collisions with planes, dangerous landing and takeoff conditions, and costly repairs. Large amounts of goose droppings in local ponds, reservoirs, and lakes, have caused a decrease in suitable water quality resulting in closed beaches and health concerns in several areas.

Complaints about resident Canada geese received by State wildlife resource agencies have been increasing in the past several years. The most recent data indicates:

- Virginia received over 800 complaints, and damage was estimated at over \$500,000.
- New York received greater than 100 complaints and estimated damage in the "millions"
- Pennsylvania estimated approximately \$2 million in damage
- Maryland receives about 100 complaints per year at a cost of over \$300,000

### Federal and State Responsibilities

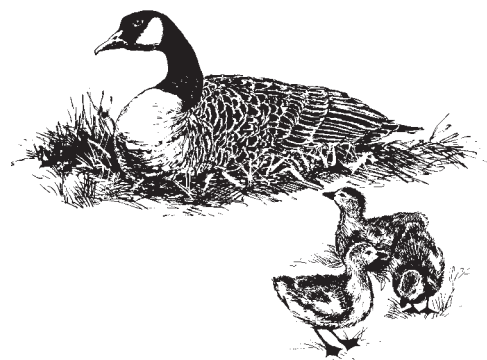
Normally, complex Federal and State responsibilities are involved with Canada goose control activities. Canada geese are Federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, therefore, all control activities, except those intended to either scare geese out of or preclude them from

using a specific area (e.g., harassment, habitat management, or repellents), require a Federal permit issued by the Service.

As the number of problems with resident Canada geese have continued to grow, the Service, with its State and Federal partners, believes alternative strategies are needed beyond those presently employed to reduce, manage, and control resident Canada goose populations in the continental United States and to reduce related damages. In this way, all agencies can provide the most responsible, cost-effective, biologically-sound, and efficient assistance available.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services program is directed by law to protect American agriculture and other resources from damage associated with wildlife. Wildlife Services conducts resident Canada goose damage management, after consultation with the Service and appropriate State agencies. The following are the number of requests for assistance to alleviate property damage the Wildlife Services program has received from selected States from 1996-99:

New Jersey 1,133	Pennsylvania 648
New York 576	Virginia 504



## Management Activities

The Service, in cooperation with States, Wildlife Services and other partners, has attempted to control and manage growing populations of resident Canada geese through existing annual hunting season frameworks (special and regular seasons), the issuance of control permits on a case-by-case basis, and special Canada goose permits.

While this approach has provided relief in some areas, it has not completely addressed the problem. Moreover, these control efforts have been met with a wide variety of reactions from the public. Some want dramatically increased control, while others in the public want the Service and its partners to sharply modify their efforts. As is the case in most wildlife management issues, resident Canada goose management is very complex. However, this issue is based on a relatively unique feature of game species management: specific population management goals.

Generally, waterfowl populations are managed for specific objectives, or target populations, which are based on years of breeding and migration studies. Population objectives are set based on these data in order to have healthy populations supported by healthy habitats. This is, in part, due to the demand of healthy populations for harvest by hunters. This is true for resident Canada geese as well. Therefore, the resident Canada goose population is being managed toward a specific population objective, in a similar fashion as the migratory populations. The key is that there is a specific management target that the Service, States, Wildlife Services, and other partners are trying to achieve.

The following are examples of spring population estimates and the population objective (or target) from 1999:

State	Current Population	Population Objective
Virginia	261,000	180,000
Maryland	74,000	30,000
New Jersey	85,000	41,000
New York	137,000	85,000
Connecticut	29,000	15,000
Rhode Island	3,000	3,000

As the figures indicate, in most States, there is a wide discrepancy between the current population and the population objective. Resident Canada geese in the Atlantic flyway, and all other flyways, are not being controlled to reach an arbitrarily low population in the flyway. Nor is it viable to eliminate or severely reduce the management flexibility that ensures the population is held in check. The key is to use the tools we have effectively to reach a sustainable population level.

### For Further Information or Questions:

Questions about resident Canada geese in the Atlantic Flyway:

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